



The Connection

Community-based Services, Advocacy
and Research for Connecticut

Good afternoon chairs and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is John Lawlor and I am the Director of Homeless Youth/Young Adult Programs at The Connection, a statewide non-profit human services agency that serves our state's homeless youth. I submit this testimony in support of preserving the Homeless Youth line item in the state budget for the fiscal years to come.

Through the continued funding in this line item, which has been administered through DCF, The Connection has been able to provide intensive, youth-specific services and housing to young people age 16-24 who are experiencing homelessness throughout the state of CT through a variety of innovative housing and service delivery models. Through this program, which started as a small, unfunded pilot, we have seen youth achieve remarkable results. 94% of youth receiving services in our program either became employed or engaged in school. Last quarter alone, 90% of our youth were employed. 90% of youth exiting our program discharged to safe, stable, permanent living arrangements. Of youth that have discharged from the program, only 3% have returned to homelessness.

As you can see from the aforementioned data, the dedicated funding to provide service to this population has made a significant difference in the lives of many of Connecticut's most vulnerable youth; however, the resources, as robust as they are, still do not provide enough funding to meet the needs of all of the homeless youth in the state. Every day for the past several years, I've been contacted by young people age 16-24 that have no place to call home and I get to hear their stories. The stories they share are those of trauma, desperation, rejection, instability, and at times even exploitation. These are themes that no 18-year-old should be grappling with at this fragile age in their lives. Sadly, I'm hearing from them while they're living in hallways, in cars, on campgrounds, in questionable motels, in relationships in exchange for a roof over their head, and on the 8th different couch they've slept on in the past month.

Our program currently has a waitlist of just under 250 youth across the state of CT, all consisting of youth between the ages of 18 to 24, some even young parents themselves. They are couch surfing with their friends and friends' families, moving from one living room to the next as they quickly wear out their welcomes. Many of the homeless young ladies I've come into contact with are involved in relationships with men for the sole purpose of having a roof over their heads. Relationships that tend to have the components of domestic violence, housing in exchange for sex, and unplanned pregnancy. And then there are the LGBTQI youth that we have come across. Rejected by their families and lacking any viable supports, they are spending nights in hallways, in cars, in storage units, or with strangers that are looking to exploit them.



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As you are aware, the Homeless Youth line item is now shifting from the Department of Children & Families to the Department of Housing for Fiscal Year 2018. With that change, as well as the tough choices regarding funding that CT law makers will soon have to make, I fear that our youngest and most vulnerable of homeless young adults/youth may again be in a position where they are competing with the adult homeless system for resources—a circumstance that has historically left homeless youth with depleted resources and inappropriate services.

By talking to homeless young people in our program, we have learned that the existing systems meant to serve homeless persons in our state are failing to catch these youths. You won't find most of these youths in shelters or in the other adult programs geared towards resolving homelessness. Often, those environments are viewed as being unsafe, too restrictive, and re-traumatizing to them. While CT has done a phenomenal job in resolving both veteran chronic homelessness and adult chronic homelessness, this has come at the cost of developing service and shelter/housing options for our state's most vulnerable young people. Too frequently I have observed young adults having been unable to access the available adult homeless system resources as they are not disabled enough (yet), have not been unsheltered for long enough (yet), and are not medically vulnerable enough (yet) in order to be given prioritization for services through mainstream systems. Through our close collaboration with the Department of Children & Families in administering our homeless youth program for the past 5 years, we were successfully able to create youth-specific service and shelter/housing options that have proven to be attractive to homeless youth (both system and non-system involved) and that give priority to them because of their age and vulnerability.

With the federal and state focus now shifting towards addressing and ending Youth Homelessness by the end of 2020, we are now faced with an exciting and still daunting task. Although a portion of the state was recently awarded a HUD grant to address youth homelessness, those resources, if they actually become available, are time limited (2 years) and are not eligible to be used in Fairfield County. As such, while these additional recourses are important, they cannot serve to tackle this problem alone—and continued state resources are necessary to effectively address youth and young adult homelessness. To use an analogy, through its progress in ending chronic homelessness the state, providers, and systems have done a phenomenal job bailing water out of an overflowing tub. In addressing youth homelessness, we now get to shift our focus to fixing the leaking pipe that was filling that tub.

Thank you again for your time this evening and for your continued support in ending youth homelessness in CT. Ameliorating youth homelessness in our state is one of the most sound decisions, both socially and financially, that we as a state can make.



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Respectfully submitted by,

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